DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 687 CS 211 669

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TITLE Not So Easily Defined: Notes from a Natural-Process Expressionist Vitalist Process-Person Practitioner.
PUB DATE Mar 89
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (40th, Seattle, WA, March 16-18, 1989).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classification; *Educational Philosophy; Higher Education; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Practitioners; University of New Hampshire

ABSTRACT

According to Stephen M. North, most of the people in composition belong to a category he calls "Practitioners," so the description is not only applied to the University of New Hampshire (UNH). But if the instructors at UNH are most influenced by one person, it would be Donald Murray, and he is specifically listed as a Practitioner. It's interesting, too, that while reading North's book in a research methods course, the professor, new to UNH from Ohio State, said, "If every university has an identity with which its graduate students are associated, UNH's identity is intimately bound with Practitioners." Categorizations by their nature draw bold lines, sacrificing complexity for clarity. In recent books, North, James Berlin, and George Hillocks all set up a priori categories, and all list as representative of those categories specific people and their work. In the process they oversimplify and distort that work. When categories are set up their labeling serves not only to illuminate but to promote the favorite methods, modes and ideologies of certain authors--not on their intrinsic merits but at the expense of denigrating others. One suggestion is to be skeptical of categories which argue for a particular stance rather than clarify options. (RAE)

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17 March 1989
Conference on College Composition and Communication

Session Title: Quality, Process and Writing Instruction: Three Responses to Critiques

Speech Topic: "Not So Easily Defined: Notes from a Natural-Process Expressionist Vitalist Process-Person Practitioner

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Do you remember the classic western scene with two cowboys arguing over a card game? "You callin' me a cheater, mister?" one asks, rising from the table. The other sneers, "I'm callin' you a lowdown dirty cheatin' skunk!" At this point the piano player stops, and the saloon patrons get ready to duck. Sometimes the guy was cheating, sometimes not, but the name-calling itself heated things up.

I share this sort of cowboy sensitivity to labeling, so, in the past couple of years, when I have come across passages describing and critiquing things like "natural process" and "expressionist" theories of writing--and then found out they were referring to *us* , those "process-people" at the University of New Hampshire--my response has been, "Whoa . . . you're calling me a *what* ?" I don't want to have a shootout here, but I believe some clarification is in order. As a student and a teacher at the university which is labeled with such terms, I want to describe for you the composition program in the English Department at New Hampshire. I think you'll see that the labels are more constricting than constructive. Specifically, I will look at Stephen North's description of Practitioners in The Making of Knowledge in Composition, James Berlin's "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," and George Hillocks, Jr.'s

Research on Written Composition.

First I want to deal with a general category, into which many of you may fall yourselves: what North calls Practitioners. According to North, most of the people in composition belong to this category, so his description is not applied only to UNH. But if we ~~are~~ at UNH are most influenced by one person, I think it would be Donald Murray, and he is specifically listed as a Practitioner. It's interesting, too, that while we were reading North's book in a research methods course, the professor, new to UNH from Ohio State, said, "If every university has an identity with which its graduate students are associated, UNH's identity is intimately bound with Practitioners."

Part of North's portrait, particularly regarding "lore," is appropriate to UNH: its pragmatism, its experiential base, its expansiveness, its willingness to absorb knowledge from all quarters. We like plurality, and the acceptance of contraries. It is an oral culture, too, with theory and practice discussed in staff meetings, classrooms, and particularly the third floor of Ham-Smith Hall, where most of the instructors are housed, and where all the best tinkers tinker.

But North sells us short. He says "Practitioners themselves see their

primary task as that of preparing their charges for some real or imagined exigencies (an exit exam, a portfolio submission, the next grade level, a college career, and so on) imposed from outside, beyond the bounds of their immediate relationship with the students" (37). Probably many of the writing instructors at UNH would agree that we do want to prepare students for certain exigencies. But that's not all. Murray obviously has more on his mind than "what to teach for Friday's class" when he says, in A Writer Teaches Writing, "Writing is not superficial to the intellectual life but central to it; writing is one of the most disciplined ways of making meaning and one of the most effective methods we can use to monitor our own thinking" (2).

I can use myself as another example. This semester I am team-teaching with Sherrie Gradin an introduction to prose writing called "The Nature(s) of Reality." Of course we want to prepare students to submit a portfolio, but our primary goal is to get students to examine the way they view the world. We're reading and writing about quantum physics, eastern mysticism, metaphors, and nature--not simply to generate essays, but to generate thinking. Our explicit agenda is to encourage students to explore their view of what constitutes reality, for

them and others.

You see why I'm perplexed by North's label. This category is as leaky as the Seattle sky. Let's look at another section. In the first chapter of the book, North discusses the common perception of Practitioners as essentially "technicians: Scholars and especially Researchers *make* knowledge; Practitioners apply it" (21). Ellen Blackburn-Karelitz, who has published a number of research studies from her own classroom, would be surprised to find that she is simply applying knowledge, as would Virginia Stuart, co-author of Write From the Start.

We could look at some more prominent examples. Tom Newkirk, Director of Freshman English, has just finished a book on children's expository writing. It's closer to textual analysis than teaching practice, which would place it in North's "Hermeneutical Inquiry." Bob Connors appears in North's book under "The Historians," and his latest article is an error analysis. Don Murray has left a wonderful legacy at UNH, but he is retired and I think he wishes we'd quit pestering him. When North names Murray a prominent Practitioner, both Murray and UNH are given a label which doesn't fit, like a sidesaddle on a cutting horse.

Next, I'd like to look at a set of categories with an explicitly political focus. James Berlin, in his article "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class," posits three types of rhetoric: cognitive psychology, expressionism, and social-epistemic, and he advocates social-epistemic rhetoric as being "most worthy of emulation in the clasroom" (492). He lists Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, and Peter Elbow as some of the most visible members of the "expressionist camp" (485).

Berlin notes the political roots of this rhetoric, saying that most proponents "during the sixties and seventies were unsparingly critical of the dominant social, political, and cultural practices of the time" (485). But now, according to Berlin, " For expressionistic rhetoric, the correct response to the imposition of current economic, political, and social arrangements is . . . resistance, but a resistance that is always construed in individual terms. Collective retaliation poses as much of a threat to individual integrity as do the collective forces being resisted, and so is itself suspect" (487).

Yet Berlin himself admits that the "focus on the individual does not mean that no community is to be encouraged, as expressionists repeatedly acknowledge that communal arrangements must be made" (486).

First of all, Berlin is accurate in acknowledging the emphasis on the individual writer at UNH; Freshman English may be the only class that first year in which a student is known by her or his first name and seen individually in conference on a weekly basis. Berlin is inaccurate, though, in suggesting this emphasis on individuality leads to isolation and loss of power, or co-option by capitalistic forces. Berlin wants to ignore the fact that individuals make up whatever collective emerges. An emphasis on the individual does not preclude social action, social protest, or collective activity. In fact, it empowers students to examine issues and to make stands which they believe in; and it establishes a community which may indeed unite for political as well as social and educational ends.

Some examples might be helpful at this point. Political issues are not requisite discussion in every Freshman English section, although occasionally a course will deal specifically with such issues, as in Nora Nevin's special topics course on conflict. Yet many of the instructors are acutely aware of political issues and often use them as focal points of writing and discussion. Sue Wheeler gives her students an aphorism about brotherhood, then asks them to reconsider the statement after reading an article on fraternities. Brock Dethier asks students to write about rape

from the point of view of the opposite sex. The usual range of paper topics every semester will include issues like abortion, nuclear waste, political elections, family violence. Political issues come naturally to the forefront when students are encouraged to critically examine their world.

Here, then, is the crux of the matter. The writing program at UNH will allow for a Berlin; social-epistemic rhetoric apparently will not allow for a Murray. Berlin identifies three types of rhetoric; to bring into focus his particular ideology, he blurs the ideologies of the other two. He's like a rancher who fences off the rangeland: one section for the Guernseys, one for the Herefords, and one for the Texas steers. "Texas steers are the best," he drawls. "They got the longest horns."

Finally, I will look at what purports to be an objective survey of research, George Hillocks, Jr.'s Research on Written Composition. Hillocks's whole meta-analysis is problematic, but here I'll focus on the modes of instruction, which he classifies as presentational, natural process, environmental, and individualized.

> The natural process mode is characterized by (1) generalized objectives, e.g., to increase fluency and skill in writing; (2) free writing about whatever interests the students, either in a journal or

> as a way of "exploring a subject"; (3) writing for audiences of peers; (4) generally positive feedback from peers; (5) opportunities to revise and rework writing; and (6) high levels of interaction among students. (119)

In fact, "natural process" is not so easily codified as Hillocks implies. All of the above characteristics might be found in a UNH writing classroom, but it's an incomplete picture. When he describes "natural process," I see our saddle . . . I see our bridle . . . but where's our horse? Oh, he's tied it up to the hitching post at the Environmental Mode!

So let's take a look at the horse. The official guidelines for teaching Freshman English state: "the primary emphasis in every section should be on helping students learn to write better" (Lindberg 7) and "Freshman English allows a student...to use writing as an aid to thinking. This is another way of understanding writing as the making and discovery of meaning" (21). The guidelines include Hillocks's first characterization of increasing fluency in writing, but go beyond that.

Hillocks describes a series of activities found in an "environmental" classroom, any of which might be found in any Fresman English classroom at UNH. A description/narration inquiry could describe oranges, or pencils, or people eating at the Union Building. Inquiry and argument activities

might range from arguing the merits of Oreo vs. Pepperidge Farm cookies, to a structured presentation of Toulmin's model. Student essays are regularly xeroxed and distributed, both within individual classes and between sections, and readers are used extensively in composition classes, providing professional models. The inquiry and analysis model is not a one-time activity, but a habit of mind: students are regularly asked to analyzye their own writing, other students' writing, reading, responses to reading, their own thinking--not just as part of an experiment but as an integral part of learning the composing process.

Choosing a topic, reading about it, utilizing sources outside the classroom, interviewing people, discussing the subject with others, taking trips to gather information (Hillocks 185-6)--all of these activities are a part of the students' repertoire, not for every paper or for one isolated paper, but as strategies to call upon when necessary. We do not withhold information from students, hoping that they will stumble onto it on their own; we provide models and suggest strategies on both an individual and group basis.

In the teaching packet distributed to new T.A.'s at UNH, a variety of pedagogical stances are made available. Books like Berthoff's

Forming/Thinking/Writing and Susan Horton's Thinking Through Writing are recommended, as are heuristic strategies (Gary Lindberg's "Acts of Mind") and theories of topic choice (David Bartholomae's "Writing Assignments: Where Writing Begins").

We at UNH incorporate a variety of modes of instruction. Some of us use free writing, present grammar lessons, assign topics; some do not. Consider the similarities between Hillocks' inquiry methods and the operations required in writing for Freshman English:

Hillocks lists the following activities:

> "finding and stating specific details which convey personal experience vividly, examining sets of data to develop and support explanatory generalizations, or analyzing situations which present problems of various kinds and developing arguments about these situations." (249)]

UNH Guidelines list these activities:

> Whatever the field of study, there are a series of operations that people go through in order to understand, to learn and to interpret:
> 1) They observe and record observations. Here the page holds the record.
> 2) They gather their observations, relating them and questioning them. Again the page records the gatherings.
> 3) They formulate ideas about the subject. Here the very demands of language are a help--to determine the subject and the predicate of a sentence is to bring precision to one's thought.
> 4) They manipulate the idea by asking questions about it, exploring it in alternative contexts...

5) They correlate and condense all that they have done. (Lindberg 21)

Both modes ask students to find and examine details, and to explain and analyze ideas. The distinction Hillocks makes is misleading.

Murray "and others of his persuasion" (like me) do believe that writing can lead one to meaning. Hillocks's example of Murray's doodling during a lecture (176) is an example of a mind constantly receptive to ideas, open to writing--not a prescription that freewriting is the only way to come to meaning. Murray advocates freewriting as one of many ways to begin writing (Write to Learn) and it is Hillocks, not Murray, who makes it the foundation of this method he calls "natural process."

The point is not that environmental instruction "moves beyond process without abandoning it" (248), as Hillocks states. The point is that in order to illuminate "environmental" instruction, Hillocks *sets up* "natural process." The resulting portrait is inaccurate and does a disservice to those he links with the method.

I want to be clear about this. I am not making a blanket statement against categorization. We categorize our world in order to make sense of it, to help us understand. And any framework has its tradeoffs. Categorizations by their nature draw bold lines, sacrificing complexity for

clarity. North, Berlin, and Hillocks all set up *a priori* categories, and all list as representative of those categories specific people and their work. In the process they oversimplify and distort that work.

More important, though, the labeling serves not only to illuminate but to *promote* . These authors advocate certain methods, modes, and ideologies--not on their intrinsic merits but at the expense of denigrating others. I am suggesting that we be skeptical of categories which argue for a particular stance rather than clarify options. I am suggesting that some categories contain agendas worth examining.

When you play poker, you ante up; you make some guesses about what everybody else has got; you might the raise the stakes or fold. Sometimes you're not holding the hand you'd like people to think you have. If you keep playing, someone may call you on it. Mr. North, Mr. Berlin, Mr. Hillocks--I call.

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